

The Geography of Interwar Britain: The State and Uneven Development

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of the past but he also recognises the need to ensure that it does not cloud our understanding of change. One could also add that it must not impair our ability to find new solutions to problems or to grasp new opportunities. Many interesting points are made in this chapter and, indeed, that is a characteristic of the volume, which offers many stimulating points for discussion and debate. It will make a useful reference for use in tutorials and seminars.

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The Geography of Interwar Britain: The State and Uneven Development

STEVEN V. WARD, 1988

London: Routledge

260 pp., £30.00 hardback

Over a number of years Stephen Ward has carved out something of a niche for himself in the study of interwar Britain. Starting with a paper in 1982 on local authority borrowing and the mysterious List Q, through a PhD thesis at Birmingham on local government and a paper on the lost tradition of local industrial promotion, his work has demonstrated the importance of an historical perspective on the formation of public policy (Ward, 1982, 1983, 1984). Building on these earlier pieces he has now produced a book which examines more broadly the relationship of the state to the economy—and geography—of the interwar period, and advances the thesis that state intervention, by complying with the priorities of private capital, served to accentuate the underlying tendency towards uneven spatial development between 'inner' and 'outer' areas of Britain.

This thesis is pursued through an examination of the main areas of government policy—macro-economic, defence, industrial restructuring, labour relations and the labour market, local government and the regions—and involves a series of interesting case-studies. It is argued that the interwar period was transitional for both economy and state. The concentration of industrial capital created the first signs of a centralised economy with branch plants in outer areas run from metropolitan headquarters—a tendency which would be completed after the war. Likewise the functions of govern-

ment were moving through an awkward period of transition from Victorian *laissez-faire* towards Keynesian demand management. The independence of local authorities, which had been considerable in Victorian times, was eroded during the 1930s, creating the first signs of a centralised state with local councils implementing national policies—a tendency that would likewise be completed after 1945.

Ward shows that, despite extensions to the franchise between 1918 and 1928, business continued to exert a preponderant influence over government. This influence was transmitted via three macro-economic orthodoxies which, though suspended during the war, were restored with a vengeance from 1920 to 1925: "The orthodoxy of the gold standard was about governments not interfering in currency exchange rates. Free trade was about them not imposing barriers to international trade. Public finance orthodoxy was about the state doing as little as possible and not borrowing to do it, unless the resultant debt would be self-liquidating" (p. 48). The economy of outer Britain was particularly geared to export markets, and when the gold standard was restored the damage to overseas trade was felt most acutely in the outer areas. Furthermore, the orthodox view of public finance demanded balanced budgets, high interest rates to control inflation, and public spending cuts: "as translated spatially... the 'Treasury view' meant that state spending was discouraged most completely in depressed areas" (p. 51) where income generated might not be large enough to liquidate the associated public debt. In 1922 the Treasury pressed for cuts in defence spending. Despite greater efficiency on the part of private shipyards in Scotland and the north, and higher levels of unemployment in these areas, naval contracts were reassigned to Royal Dockyards in the south. Ward shows that this spatial effect was determined not by the Treasury itself but by the Admiralty, which wanted to retain strategic capacity in traditional naval towns within easy reach of the metropolis. Following the slump and the Invergordon naval mutiny in 1931, attitudes began to change and all three orthodoxies were eventually abandoned. But it was not until 1937, with rearmament in the context of an air threat to southern England, that defence contracts were once again restored to the outer regions. In the meantime cut-backs followed by centrally directed growth contri-

buted to the emergence of branch plant economies in the areas concerned.

Qualitative aspects of regional inequality are explored by reference to policies for labour. The experience of unemployment was prolonged in the outer areas and this, together with greater dependence upon intrusive means-tested benefits, contributed to what Ward calls a spatial concentration of feeling. The state was hostile to unemployment maintenance payments: "there was a general feeling amongst all capitalist interests that the system eroded individual responsibility and enterprise" (p. 139) and that it reduced people's willingness to search for work in other areas. As regards the spatial impact of local government, the general pattern was for low spending councils to be found in depressed areas and high spending ones in more buoyant parts. There was "a remarkable consistency across boroughs with common economic experience" (p. 168). To determine the origins of this pattern Ward refers to a variety of factors, including central-local relations. Financial orthodoxy was applied by the Ministry of Health to local government spending through the granting of loan sanctions in accordance with a secret blacklist (the List Q). The Ministry considered that local authorities in depressed areas should be discouraged from extending their credit and from providing services which might deter people from migrating out: "the listings were in effect indicating an intention to limit capital spending more severely in depressed areas than elsewhere" (p. 174). These lists, together with the system of government subsidy, were "a direct link between the Treasury view of public spending orthodoxy and the Town Hall. Essentially they incorporated a view of local state investment as something which should spatially reinforce the capitalist-led development process" (p. 175).

A number of local authorities had been involved in tourism and industrial promotion since the early 1900s. These activities expanded after 1920 but encountered resistance from the Ministry of Health: "the prevailing central orthodoxy of the interwar period was that capitalist development relatively untrammelled by state intervention would ultimately solve the spatial problem of unemployment" (p. 231). It was not until 1934, with the Special Areas Acts, that central government began to provide regional assistance, and although this succeeded in placing regional policy on the agenda it was

by itself largely symbolic, given the small sums of money involved, and promoted a centralist attitude that excluded local councils.

Ward's empirical account is developed in the context of a theoretical framework drawn from "radical political economy", which combines historical materialism with insights derived from other social sciences. There are a number of comments which could be made about this choice and the way in which it is applied. It is unfortunate that there is no discussion of alternative theoretical frameworks, or of the degree to which local government can be accommodated within a unitary model of the state. And although he seems to favour a neo-marxism along the lines of that developed by (say) Duncan and Goodwin (1982), neither this nor the dual state thesis—as expressed in (for instance) Cawson and Saunders (1983)—receives explicit consideration (apart from one reference to Saunders on p. 206 which is not picked up in the index or bibliography). But Ward's emphasis is empirical, and in these circumstances he has chosen an approach that succeeds well in drawing together a wide variety of historical events and revealing the common principles of work within them.

Ward's substantive thesis—that the state reinforced the capitalist tendency towards uneven spatial development—is confirmed satisfactorily in references to the gold standard, public spending, defence, and constraints on local government spending. The contribution of his analysis of industrial restructuring to the overall argument is, however, less convincing. The iron and steel industry is portrayed as a suitable case for restructuring, which the government recognised but was unwilling to force through in the absence of a consensus for change within the industry and amongst steel users. But we are told that where restructuring did take place—as in the case of Corby or the electricity industry—this reduced capacity in outer areas and shifted activity 'inwards'. The implication would seem to be that local and regional capitals were strong enough to resist centralisation, and that through their actions capacity was retained in outer areas—under outer control—for a longer period than would otherwise have been the case. So the state, by giving in to the preference of private capital for an unreconstructed steel industry, helped to defer greater unevenness: in which case there is no automatic tendency towards uneven devel-

opment, only a contingent tendency that depends upon the geography of capital and the strength of capitals in different areas and at different levels.

Despite these qualifications, however, *The Geography of Interwar Britain* is an important contribution to our understanding of both the interwar period and the history of state intervention. This is achieved through an excellent empirical study which combines breadth of scope with richness of detail, and reveals all too clearly the similarities between government in the 1920s and government in the 1980s. Ward's primary concern is empirical—to understand the state and its spatial impact on the interwar period—and yet he is correct in insisting upon a “sense of the need for both generalisation and awareness of real complexity” (p. 33). The right balance between history and theory is immensely difficult to achieve, and although he has not quite pulled this off he has produced a work which demonstrates the absolute necessity of both an historical and a geographical dimension within the practice of a unified social science.

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Urban Inequality under Socialism. Case Studies from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union

DAVID M. SMITH, 1989

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

76 pp., £3.95 paperback

The scale and acceleration of economic and political transformation in Eastern Europe create a demand for updated information and explanation. The booklet produced by David M. Smith in the new UPDATE series arrives timeously and provides a wide range of information and empirical materials.

The issue of East European geographical studies is one of the most neglected subjects in English-language literature. The only exceptions are the numerous studies of the Soviet Union and the specialist journal, *Soviet Geography*.

Literature about East European cities in English is dispersed in different journals and in not easily available national geographical journals. In this situation this book is very welcome and useful for anyone trying to obtain information about Eastern Europe.

Smith is right when he stresses that the urban issue is almost *terra incognita* not only for Western readers, but also for Eastern European scholars. In spite of very rapid urbanisation and a significant volume of urban research, subjects like inequality or segregation were censored or discouraged by official scientific bodies. For example the factorial ecology studies so popular in Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s were very limited or unrealisable in Eastern Europe (except Poland). The last evidence and description of such constraints in the Soviet Union were provided by Miedviedkov (1990). Nevertheless some investigation has been conducted (in the case of Poland numerous studies) and these are the basic material for Smith's study.

The focus on inequalities is a very good starting point as one of the core problems in understanding not only urban societies but the last transformation in Eastern Europe in general. The booklet is in eight chapters which provide for researchers and students important sources of material for the advanced analysis of urban and social problems in that region.

Two chapters deal with the Soviet Union's cities: one with the capital—Moscow—and the other with other cities. The same structure is applied to Poland: one chapter for the capi-